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Intra-European migration decisions and welfare systems: the missing life course link

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ABSTRACT

Welfare systems are often perceived as key for migration decisions. Yet traditional international migration theories usually include this factor as rather static in nature and do not acknowledge the dynamic interaction with the individual life course. This is unfortunate, as the impact of macro-level circumstances on individual migration decisions may vary over a person's life, particularly for factors that are intrinsically connected to the life course, as is the case with the welfare system. In this study, we propose an innovative conceptual model which fruitfully combines insights from migration theories with principles of the life course approach. Using qualitative interview data from 36 European citizens born in Poland, Spain and the UK and residing in the Netherlands, we investigated how welfare systems are perceived and experienced at the individual level, and how these perceptions, knowledge and practices may enter migration decisions. Our study empirically underpins the main premise of the theoretical model that migration decisions and the factors shaping them should be explained as connected through the life course. The proposed conceptual model is suitable to explain the influence of welfare systems on migration decisions, but also that of other structural factors.

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Life course perspective; intra-European migration; migration decision-making; welfare system

Introduction

The way in which migration is conceptualised and theorised is largely shaped by dominant international migration flows in the past, including nineteenth-century settler migration from Europe to America, post-war guest-workers from the Mediterranean to northwest Europe, and post-World Wars refugees (King 2002). As a result, international migration theories have had a predominantly economic character and tended to exclusively focus on young male migrants. Yet this no longer fits international migration today, as new mobility strategies are deployed to achieve economic and non-economic objectives, and include young and old migrants, as well as men and women (Castles, De Haas, and Miller 2014). It is increasingly acknowledged that besides responses to emergencies and crises, international migration is often a pro-active, deliberate decision to improve livelihoods and achieve personal goals. Migration cannot be sufficiently explained from income differences

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alone, and factors such as income risks, access to labour markets and social security (welfare) are increasingly recognised as other important determinants.

Even though the role of welfare systems in migration decisions has received considerable attention from both popular press and scientific scholars, empirical findings on this relation have been rather mixed (for an overview of the literature, see Giulietti and Wahba 2012). This may result from the fact that migration theories so far mainly approached international migration as a one time and long-term (possibly even life-long) decision. Potential migrants could therefore be expected to not just consider factors relevant to them at the moment of migration, but also those to become important later in life. Yet since the late 1980s and early 1990s, international migration patterns within Europe have changed substantially (Engbersen and Snel 2013; Favell 2008; King 2002). This 'new migration' generally has a more diverse and flexible character than the 'old migration' observed over the first post-war decades. Especially in the context of international mobility within the European Union (EU) this becomes pertinent due to regulations establishing the freedom of movement. In addition, more and more people migrate at different stages in their lives as a result of onward or circular migration. Although long-term settlement still occurs as well, 'keeping your options open' seems to have become a rational attitude amongst many intra-European migrants (Engbersen 2018).

In this study, we argue that the changed nature of intra-European migration has important implications for theoretical explanations on migration decisions in this context. First, theories that treat international migration as a once in a lifetime, life-long decision seem less suitable to explain the more flexible migration patterns observed today (Carling and Collins 2018; Collins 2018). Second, because of their understanding of migration as a single action rather than a process and their largely economic nature, traditional international migration theories do not explicitly address differences in the impact of macro-level factors on individuals' migration decisions over time (De Haas 2010; Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long 2018). This becomes particularly problematic where the impact of these factors on individuals' lives can be expected to vary over different life phases, as is the case with the welfare system. To enhance our understanding of contemporary migration patterns, the connection between macro-level factors and individual migration decision-making should therefore be studied in a more dynamic way. Yet whereas literature on residential (or internal) mobility largely recognises the importance of the life course, this perspective has not been sufficiently integrated in conceptual models on international migration.

In this study, we propose a conceptual model for understanding contemporary intra-European migration in which we integrate and expand international migration theories with principles from the life course approach. In the dynamic model we propose, the life course principles of *timing*, *life-span development*, and *time and place* explain how the interaction of structure and agency can be expected to vary over time. To empirically underpin the model, we investigate how welfare systems are perceived and experienced at the individual level, and how such perceptions, knowledge and practices may enter migration decisions. Previous studies investigating the link between welfare and migration typically used macro-level indicators like total social expenditure by the government or the level of unemployment benefits to capture cross-national differences in welfare generosity. These quantitative measures are rather narrow and unlikely to reflect individual experiences (Ehata and Seeleib-Kaiser 2017). We therefore conceptualise welfare systems in

much more inclusive terms and consider formal welfare state arrangements provided by governments to citizens such as social insurance, welfare benefits and public services, as well as support received from informal welfare providers. Using data from in-depth qualitative interviews with 36 European migrants living in the Netherlands, we show how our model makes an essential contribution to the migration literature, and for our understanding of the role of the welfare system (as a macro-level factor) for intra-European migration decisions in particular.

Theory

Two paradigms have dominated the way migration scholars have linked macro-level circumstances to individual migration decisions: 'functionalist' and 'historical-structural' theories (Castles, De Haas, and Miller 2014). Theories within the functionalist tradition largely see migrants as rational actors, who decide to move on the basis of a cost–benefit calculation. The push–pull model (Lee 1966), but also human capital theories (e.g. Stark and Taylor 1991) and neo-classical models (e.g. Borjas 1989) fit within this paradigm. Historical-structural theories on the other hand emphasise how social, economic, cultural and political structures constrain and direct the behaviour of individuals and help explain why real-life migration patterns often deviate from neoclassical predictions. Both perspectives can be criticised for being too one-sided to adequately understand the complexity of international migration (De Haas 2010). Where functionalist approaches largely neglect historical causes of movements and assume perfect knowledge of potential migrants, historical-structural approaches mainly focus on political and economic structures and pay little attention to individual preferences. More holistic migration models, like the ability/aspiration model of Carling (2002) and the migration model of De Haas (2010) therefore combined structure and agency to understand international migration decision-making and the resulting moves.

The theoretical frameworks on international migration have been used to derive specific hypotheses regarding the role of the welfare system in migration decisions. Most prominent in the literature is the 'welfare magnet hypothesis', which expects migrants to move towards the destinations where they can enjoy the most generous benefits (Borjas 1999; Giulietti 2014). The reasoning behind this hypothesis is rather economic and mostly in line with functionalist theories: welfare state arrangements are expected to be valued for their potential to increase household income and to reduce costs of migration in the shape of risks. A generous welfare system in the destination country is therefore expected to increase the returns of migration, this way affecting the direction and size of migration flows.

Migration and the welfare system in the context of Europe

Over the past decades, the EU has engaged actively in promoting free movement of EU citizens between its member states and establishing a legal framework to facilitate this (European Commission 2015). Meanwhile, considerable variation exists in the way EU member states have organised their welfare state arrangements (Kuitto 2011; Scruggs and Allan 2006). As many legal barriers to migrate between member states have been abolished, one could expect the differences in welfare systems across Europe to

have a particularly strong influence on intra-EU migration (Razin and Wahba 2015). Empirical findings of studies testing the relationship between intra-European migration and the welfare system however have been rather mixed. Several studies found no evidence that generous welfare states attract immigrants (Giulietti et al. 2013; Skupnik 2014). Others documented the existence of a welfare magnet effect – albeit the economic impact was typically moderate (De Giorgi and Pellizzari 2009; Warin and Svaton 2008). These mixed findings from previous studies suggest that the role of welfare systems in intra-European migration decisions might be more complex than has been theorised so far.

By focusing on the welfare system in the destination country as a pull factor, previous research largely ignored the potential importance of the welfare system in the origin country. This is unfortunate, as it can be expected that people are less motivated to migrate when the welfare system in the country of residence provides social security in the form of income support, good public schooling, healthcare and housing (De Haas 2010; Massey 1998; Stark and Taylor 1991). In addition, individuals who are reliant on welfare state arrangements in the origin country are likely less resourceful, and therefore less capable to move internationally (Carling 2002). Related to this, during the first five years after migration, inactive EU migrants have limited welfare rights in the destination country (Mantu and Minderhoud 2016). Without income from paid labour, these migrants may initially depend on exported benefits from the origin country. This way, the welfare system in the country of origin can have significant implications for EU citizens' ability to settle in another member state (Bruzelius, Reinprecht, and Seeleib-Kaiser 2017).

Theoretical reasoning on the welfare system in intra-European migration decisions also paid little attention to life course variation in individuals' welfare needs and rights. The migration models of Carling (2002) and De Haas (2011) allow for *inter*-personal differences in migration decisions by acknowledging that macro-level factors may not affect aspirations and abilities for all individuals equally. However, related to the role of the welfare system in shaping migration decisions one could also expect *intra*-personal differences. Within Europe, access to welfare state arrangements is largely tied to life course events, such as the passage from initial education to work, from work to unemployment, from being single to setting up a family, from work to retirement, and so on (De Graaf and Maier 2017). As individuals' welfare rights and needs change over the life course, the role of welfare state arrangements in migration decisions may vary depending on the moment of migration within a person's life. Yet the life course has neither been systematically included in theoretical explanations on the relationship between welfare systems and migration, nor in models on international migration decisions in general.

It is much needed to better integrate expectations derived from international migration theories with the life course approach, which also alludes to the importance of origin and destination in migration choices. The life course approach focuses (like international migration theories) on how people formulate and pursue their life goals (*agency*), and how they may be enabled or constrained by structural opportunities and limitations in their lives (*structure*). However, the life course approach additionally emphasises the complex interplay of structure and agency *over time* (Cooke and Gazso 2009). As such, this framework is highly relevant to study the role of welfare systems in current intra-

European migration decisions, precisely adding where previous international migration models fall short.

Introducing the life course approach

The life course approach is built around five heuristic principles: life-span development, agency, time and place, timing and linked lives (Elder 1995; Levy and Buhlmann 2016). Each of the five principles is underpinned by a more general notion that individual lives are embedded within webs that stretch across time and space (Bailey 2009). International migration research seems to increasingly acknowledge the importance of this notion. King (2002) for instance argued that to fully understand contemporary European migration a double embeddedness of migration should be recognised. At the macro scale, the study of migration must be embedded in the societies and social processes of both the places of origin and destination, and at the individual scale, migration must be embedded in a migrant's life course. More recently, Collins (2018) described migration as 'an ongoing process where past, present and future are folded together in the emergence of migrant lives'. However, despite its relevance to our understanding of new migration patterns observed today, the life course approach has not been included to its full potential in international migration studies yet (Findlay et al. 2015; Wingens et al. 2011).

Towards a dynamic model of migration

Compared to the literature on international migration, literature on residential mobility has drawn more actively on the life course approach to explain the relation between the likelihood of moving and other life course events, as well as the implications of these events for the preferred residential environments (Clark and Withers 2007; Coulter, Van Ham, and Findlay 2016; Geist and McManus 2008; Mulder and Hooimeijer 1999). At the micro-level, the principles of agency and linked lives are used to explain how individuals' mobility decisions are configured by preferences, personal ties and exchanges with other people in their social networks (Dykstra and van Wissen 1999). The principles of timing, life-span development and time and place stress the dynamics that bind individual lives to structural conditions (Coulter, Van Ham, and Findlay 2016). Thus, where expectations on the role of macro-level factors derived from traditional international migration theories are rather static in nature (see Figure 1), this is challenged by the life course approach.

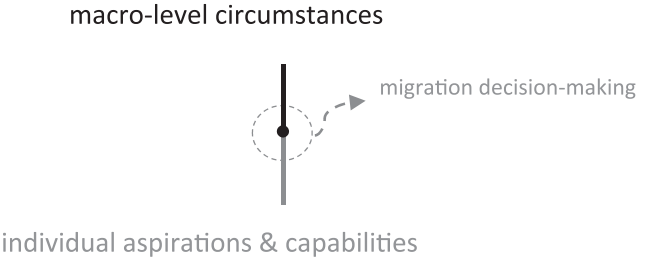

Figure 1 Schematic representation of traditional migration models.

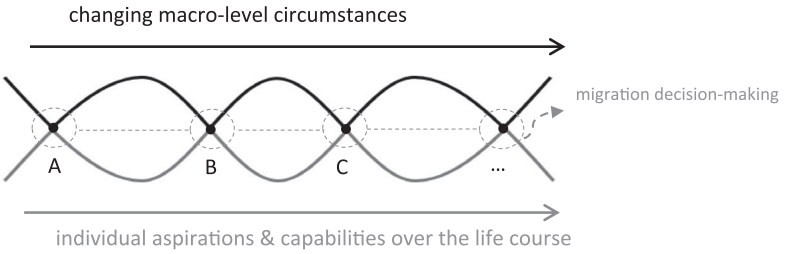

Figure 2 The dynamic model of intra-European migration.

Conceptual model

Figure 2 visualises our proposed conceptual model on contemporary intra-European migration decisions which integrates and adds on insights from the discussed theories. As in the ability/aspiration model of Carling (2002) and the migration model of De Haas (2010), macro-level characteristics of the country of residence and possible destination countries are evaluated in the light of personal needs and dreams. The outcome of this comparison might either be to stay or to go, and does not only depend on one's aspirations, but also on opportunities to choose the ideal alternative. Innovatively, points A, B and C in the model represent multiple decision points, to illustrate the ongoing nature of contemporary intra-European migration decisions. Furthermore, the model acknowledges that each decision is made at a different point in the individual's life, and possibly under different macro-level circumstances.

In the dynamic model, the principles of timing, life-span development and time and place of the life course approach can be used to explain how the interaction of structure and agency may vary over time. First, the *life-span development* principle argues that life must be viewed as a cumulative process. Thus, the decision on whether or not to migrate at decision point C will depend on earlier evaluations of macro-level circumstances at decision points A and B. Migration decisions in turn should be studied as embedded in the individual's life course and shaped by previous experiences and practices. Second, the *timing* principle explains that the personal impact of structural factors depends on where individuals are in their lives. The role of macro-level circumstances in decisions on whether or not to migrate may therefore vary between decision points A, B and C. Third, the principle of *time and place* explains that life courses are located historically as well as spatially. In effect, migration decisions cannot be understood without taking into account the social context in which they take place. Societal changes over time may result in decisions A, B and C being made under different macro-level circumstances. Furthermore, for someone migrating at decision point A, subsequent decisions to stay or to re-migrate at decision points B and C will be made in a new situation.

The conceptual model can be used to advance our understanding of the role of structural factors in contemporary intra-European migration decisions, particularly when the impact of these factors can be expected to vary over the life course – as is the case for welfare systems. To show the application of the model for studying the role of welfare systems in intra-European migration decisions, we will illustrate our theoretical arguments by means of qualitative interview data.

Table 1. Distinguished profiles and composition of the sample.

Profile	Age	Life stage	Family situation	Origin	N
1	18–35	Early working life	No children	Spain	4
				Poland	4
				UK	4
2	25–54	(Planned) parenthood	Couples with plans of having children, or persons with at least one child (up to 16 years) living with partner or not	Spain	4
				Poland	4
				UK	4
3	55+	(Approaching) retirement	Diverse situations	Spain	4
				Poland	4
				UK	4
Total N = 36					

Data and methods

Data

We draw on a qualitative data collection that we carried out within the MobileWelfare project. This project had a mixed-methods design and aimed to better understand the role of welfare systems in destination and origin countries for migration patterns within and towards Europe. For the qualitative part of the project, interviews were conducted with European and non-European migrants as well as stayers in seven European countries: Norway, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Spain, Turkey and the United Kingdom. In this study, we only use data collected amongst European migrants (born in Poland, Spain or the United Kingdom) living in the Netherlands at the time of the interview. An overview of the composition of the sample used for this study is presented in Table 1.

The qualitative interviews aimed to understand the role of welfare systems in shaping migration aspirations and decisions as well as how access to welfare benefits and transferability were perceived and put into practice. The interview guide was open-ended and followed a cross-national comparative design. A biographical approach was adopted; yet rather than covering the entire life story, the interview guide directed interviewees to particular time frames related to our research interests (Brannen 2017). These included the period leading up to and following international migration, as well as important transitions in the life course that are often related to changes in welfare dependency, such as family formation, labour market position and retirement. Respondents were asked about their knowledge on and experiences with the welfare systems of the origin and destination country in general, and more detailed in four welfare domains: child care and (primary and secondary) education, health care, work, and old age. Because care responsibilities are divided differently between the state and other actors (i.e. family members, private organisations) across countries, in the qualitative interviews we covered formal provisions by the government (in cash or in kind) as well as informal arrangements. For the purpose of this study, in our analyses we concentrate on formal welfare state arrangements.

In the interviews, respondents reflected retrospectively on their previous migration decisions. To limit retrospective biases, respondents were first asked to describe their situation prior to migration. Only after setting the stage, respondents were asked about their decision to migrate. Sensitive topics related to welfare usage were only addressed later on in the interview in order for trust between the fieldworker and the respondent to develop

first. In general, respondents seemed comfortable talking about their experiences regarding both migration and the welfare system. On numerous occasions, respondents talked openly about their usage of governmental support and the events leading up to it.

Because of the qualitative nature of the project, the aim of the researchers was not to construct nationally representative samples, but instead to diversify. Participants in the project were recruited through various channels (e.g. embassies, migrant organisations, online blogs, forums and Facebook pages, restaurants, shops, personal contacts). Data collection took place in the latter half of 2016. Most participants were living in the 'Randstad' region: the four largest cities of the Netherlands and their surroundings. A small number of interviews was conducted with people in medium-sized cities and rural areas outside the Randstad region. All interviews were conducted by team members of the project in English, Dutch or Spanish. The interviews lasted on average around 60 minutes. In most cases, respondents were interviewed face-to-face while a few (n = 7) by Skype.

Profiles

The data collection design on purpose covered different life course profiles in which the life stage and family situation were leading, whereas the age limit served more as an indicative criterion. The first profile, 'early working-life', concerned individuals in the early working ages who may be single or dating a partner but have not settled to start a family yet. The second profile, '(planned) parenthood', included individuals with dependent children (either in a relationship or single) and individuals living with a partner and thinking of family formation. The third profile, '(approaching) retirement', finally was targeted at migrants in older ages, who may or may not be retired yet. Although respondents were selected by their current life stage rather than the life stage at which they migrated, our sample included individuals who moved to the Netherlands in different phases of life. Respondents in each profile were furthermore asked about their future plans to stay or to re-migrate to gain insights into current migration considerations. This way, the interviews enabled us to explore the role of the welfare system in migration decisions across the life course.

As the literature on migration and welfare often expects welfare to be more important to the lower-educated (e.g. Razin and Wahba 2015), it was deemed important to include migrants with diverse educational attainments. Also potentially different needs of men and women may shape views on and experiences with welfare, making it important to include both genders in the fieldwork. The data collection thus included equal numbers of men and women, and individuals with varying educational backgrounds across the origin countries and within each profile.

Analytical approach

From the life course perspective, lives can be seen as biographies made up of a series of events, transitions and experiences, and shaped by the macro-context experienced over the life-span (Bailey 2009; Dykstra and van Wissen 1999). A life course perspective allows us to interpret the meanings and reasons behind people's life stories in the light of past events, socio-historical context and structural conditions (Cooke and Gazso 2009). We used this approach to gain insight into the way intra-European migration decisions are made. The interview material can be viewed as biographical accounts in

which respondents reflect on experiences in the past and expectations for the future from their present position. In line with contextual or biographical approaches, we interpreted these accounts with reference to the individual's life course as well as the structural contexts within which a life unfolds (Brannen 2017). Our attention to immediate experiences and the meanings attached to them helped ensure a data-driven analysis process.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and subsequently coded using the qualitative software package Nvivo. Data analysis proceeded through three steps. First, all transcripts were read as a whole. This was followed by abstraction of major themes related to migration experiences and welfare, and identification of meaning units associated with these themes across the interviews. Finally, the essence of the particular theme was synthesised into a consistent statement across interviews, thereby moving from the concrete to a more abstract level of understanding. The aim of the analysis was to seek recurrent thematic elements and deviations across the stories told, focusing on the content of the stories rather than dismantling the stories and analysing the segments.

Results

Applied to qualitative data, a life course approach contributes to our understanding of individual experiences by placing them in context, this way demonstrating the interrelatedness of agency and structure (Brannen 2017). When aiming to understand how migration decisions are embedded in the individual's life course and how welfare systems might play a role in shaping these decisions, we therefore structured our findings as located in time (prior to and after migration) and space (origin or destination country). We further distinguished between 'knowledge', 'perceptions' and 'practices' of welfare in relation to migration. The sections on knowledge address parts of the interviews where respondents described what they knew about the welfare system in the destination country and how they obtained this information. The sections on perceptions reflect on the subjective value respondents attached to elements of the welfare system. The sections on practices finally describe situations where actual welfare usage played a role in the decision to migrate or to stay.

Migration decisions

Respondents in our study typically did not describe their migration decisions as part of a life-long plan, that is, most individuals did not have a clear timeframe in mind for their stay abroad when making the move. In addition, most respondents did not look far into the future when deciding whether and where to move. Guiding factors in their migration decisions appeared those that were most relevant at the time of migration, which in turn depended on their life stage and personal situation in terms of family and work. Various respondents described their migration decisions early in life as 'an adventure', as they felt they had nothing to lose at that stage. Many of them however stated that their considerations for future migration decisions would be different, as their personal situation had changed in the meantime. The timing of migration in the individuals' life thus appeared a crucial element for understanding which factors play a role in migration decisions.

Another important element that came up in the interviews was the frequent re-evaluation of the options of staying in the destination country, returning to the origin country or moving somewhere new. Such assessments were often fuelled by other changes in the life course, such as family formation or contrarily a break-up or divorce, the search for a job after finishing education, or the ending of a previous contract. Several individuals described how their plans to stay could alter if changes in their personal situation would require it. One of our Polish respondents for instance answered to the question whether he decided upon his length of stay in the Netherlands prior to migration:

> No, and we still don't know. So I don't have plans like, five years and then coming back or, yeah, I have no idea. I can imagine that I would stay here 'til the end of my life but I can also imagine that I will come back next year if it's, if something happens, I don't know. Children would be one reason, if we have children it would be nice to have family closer. Uhm, if parents need help, I don't know. If it's suddenly, there is a flood coming from the sea [laughs], I don't know. (Polish man profile 1 ('early working-life'), respondent 15)

On the other hand, we observed how some life course developments could tie a person – at least temporarily – to a certain location. A British woman in the '(planned) parenthood' profile for instance described how her pregnancy made her realise for the first time that she could not 'simply uplift everything and go back to the UK'. The woman's strategy to send her children to Dutch day-care, but later on to an international school illustrates her effort to keep the option of remigration open. This finding not only shows that even in the context of the EU limits to mobility remain, but also how these limits are often linked to major life events. In line with the life-span development principle of the life course approach, such considerations of respondents show how migration decision-making should be understood as a continuing negotiation process, embedded in the individual's life course.

Influence of welfare before migration

Knowledge

When we asked our respondents about their decision to migrate, their motivations seldom included explicit references to the welfare system. In fact, respondents were usually not very informed about welfare state arrangements in the destination country prior to migration. This unawareness appeared to partly follow from a lack of interest in these benefits abroad at the time of migration. A Spanish woman, now almost retired, explained why she did not think about governmental support in case of loss of income when moving to the Netherlands:

> Well, when I came here I didn't think about anything. I just thought I'm going to a new country, I'm meeting new people, I'm getting new experiences. (…) I got the chance to do something different for nine months, something fun. And I thought then I come back to Spain. I was 27, so you don't think about those problems. Yes, but now I'm more worried than back then. (Spanish woman profile 3 ('(approaching) retirement'), respondent 39)

As we saw before, the factors most important in migration decisions were those most relevant at the time the decision was made. Particularly individuals who migrated as young adults before starting a family rarely considered welfare state arrangements in the Netherlands. Individuals migrating at older ages or together with children were typically more

aware of their welfare needs in the near future. These individuals more often gathered information on relevant welfare state arrangements in the destination country prior to migration. Thus, in line with the timing principle, our findings can be explained from the fact that in this phase of life many welfare state arrangements simply did not concern these individuals yet.

Perceptions

Whereas the decision to migrate in several cases was driven by dissatisfaction of respondents with their situation in the origin country prior to their move, in our interviews the welfare system was never explicitly mentioned as one of these factors. In fact, respondents often were quite satisfied with the welfare system in the origin country before migration. Furthermore, despite their lack of specific information on social protection in the destination country prior to migration, respondents seemed confident that European welfare state arrangements in general would be of decent standards, and that they – as EU citizens – would be able to receive support abroad when needed. In addition, respondents' flexible attitude towards migration made returning to the origin country in case of emergencies a feasible option. With return migration as a back-up plan, or the possibility of accessing welfare state arrangements in the origin country, the importance of the welfare system in the destination country appeared less important for these migrants.

Practices

Throughout the interviews we encountered situations where welfare state arrangements in the origin country influenced migration decisions. In one of these cases, a Spanish respondent and his Dutch wife purposefully postponed their move from Spain to the Netherlands until after their baby was born to obtain maternity leave under the Spanish system, since the duration was longer there. Other examples concerned respondents who received unemployment benefits from the origin country in the first months after their move to the Netherlands. Such benefits helped them to manage financially in the Netherlands until they found a job here, and as such may have enabled migration. Finally, the availability of grants for individuals to study abroad in several cases contributed to the opportunity of a first move, and typically had an influence on the destinations that were chosen. Consistent with the principle of time and place, the findings illustrate the importance of considering the societal context in which migration decisions are made, i.e. the origin country. It is important that future studies pay ample attention to not only the destination but also the origin country.

Influence of welfare after migration

Knowledge

Respondents in our sample typically obtained most information on welfare state arrangements in the Netherlands after arrival, and often only once the need for some type of support arose. Information was accessed through various sources. Some respondents gathered the information they needed on their own, mostly online. Others consulted peers – often fellow migrants – either within their personal network or through online forums or Facebook groups. Respondents with a Dutch partner mostly relied on their partner and his or her Dutch contacts for help with arrangements in the Netherlands. Several respondents

moved to the Netherlands after finding a job there; these persons were usually informed about governmental regulations by their new employer. Finally, sometimes respondents received letters from local authorities which informed them about their rights. A British widow in the '(approaching) retirement' profile, who moved to the Netherlands while receiving a survivor's allowance from the UK, for example was surprised to find out this way that she would soon start receiving a small Dutch pension, as she had passed the legal retirement age. Combinations of the different sources of information occurred as well. Importantly, which sources were available differed between individuals: the channels of a person who moved alone in search of employment in the Netherlands for instance appeared much more limited than those of a person who already had social ties or work there.

Which welfare state arrangements respondents had most knowledge of largely depended on their life stage, and the welfare needs related to it. Respondents in the 'early working-life' and '(planned) parenthood' profiles for instance often knew little about old-age pensions, and typically did not actively search for such information as long as retirement still felt far away. Approaching retirement age or hearing the experiences of people in their network on the other hand stimulated older respondents to think about their arrangements for old-age. Again, in line with the timing principle, such findings indicate how over the life course different welfare state arrangements become salient and how once this happens information is more actively sought.

Perceptions

In our data, perceptions of welfare state arrangements in the Netherlands were largely shaped by direct experiences with these programmes of our respondents themselves, or the people around them. As a result, respondents usually had a limited image of welfare state arrangements they were not entitled to or never made use of. Even after migration respondents sometimes found it difficult to compare social protection in the origin and destination country, because they only (recently) experienced the specific arrangements in one of these countries. When asked about differences between the health care system of the UK and the Netherlands, a British woman for instance reflected on the question:

> It is hard to answer, because me and my husband have been here for three years, with our ages, from 25 to 30, it is such as transition in life, there is so much changing anyway. [If I would have] stayed there, would I still be in the same situation as I was when I was 25, or would I be exactly where I am now but just in a different place? Definitely, proved that being in Holland, I believe the healthcare is better and uhm, but it was, I was not thinking, I am gonna move to Holland because the healthcare is better. (British woman profile 2 ('(planned) parenthood'), respondent 42)

Which welfare context individuals are most familiar with – the origin country, the Netherlands or yet another destination – thus largely depends on where they had most (recent) experience with welfare. This insight might also explain why our respondents did not seem to engage much in comparisons of welfare in the origin and destination country prior to migration. Without experiences in the Netherlands, the Dutch welfare system could not fully enter their frame of reference yet. The life course approach addresses such shifting perspectives through its principle of time and place.

After migration to the Netherlands, our respondents not necessarily perceived welfare to be better there than in the origin country. Especially the Dutch healthcare system was repeatedly criticised in the interviews. Nevertheless, these negative evaluations seldom seemed to have a large impact on the individual's overall level of satisfaction with the Netherlands. Respondents typically could see upsides and downsides of the system in both the origin and destination country. A British man in the '(planned) parenthood' profile for instance described the Dutch healthcare system as 'outrageously expensive' compared to the United Kingdom, yet continued by appreciating how waiting times were much shorter in the Netherlands. The interviews further showed that individuals could be very negative about the Dutch organisation of governmental support in one area (e.g. healthcare), while at the same time very positive about another (e.g. support for children and families).

Finally, some respondents mentioned the governmental system of the Netherlands as a whole, or their sense of security here, as attractive features of the country. A Spanish woman in the 'early working-life' profile for instance mentioned how she felt that, in contrast to Spain, 'the Dutch government really cares about citizens'. In such cases, satisfaction with the welfare system in the Netherlands seemed to affect the overall life satisfaction of individuals after migration, thereby possibly influencing intentions to stay or to migrate again.

Practices

In the interviews, we observed on several occasions how in some life stages or life domains welfare dependency after migration could form an actual retaining factor. Talking about the educational system in the Netherlands, a Spanish mother for instance argued:

> We thought that it [the Dutch educational system] could have many advantages. Well, not at the beginning. But when you see how well it works here, we realized it could be very convenient. Not as much because of how good education is here but because of the terrible situation of the educational system in Spain. In Spain education keeps worsening while here it keeps being of a good quality. That pulls you down to stay here. In this sense, I can only see advantages. My daughter will really benefit from this system. (Spanish woman profile 2 ('(planned) parenthood'), respondent 10)

In another interview, a Polish man in the '(approaching) retirement' profile explained how returning to Poland had become difficult due to his health conditions. An accident at the work place in the Netherlands left him dependent on a wheelchair, therapy and heavy medication, and these needs made him insecure about his possibilities to live in Poland again. The life-span development principle acknowledges the importance of such previous experiences and practices in future decisions.

Variation across skill-level, gender and nationality

Our interviews were diversified to cover educational level, country of origin and gender. Although a detailed analysis of these elements is beyond the scope of the current study (future studies could address each of these dimensions further), we did address the question whether our findings on the life course seem to be skill, gender or origin country-specific. As argued above, the available sources of information on social support after migration varied between individuals with different migration histories. Respondents

who moved after finding a job for instance were often assisted with formal arrangements in the Netherlands by their new employer. As this latter scenario was more common for individuals with a higher level of education, we observed differences between high- and low-skilled migrants. However, although these different migration histories also indicated a more fragile economic position of low-skilled individuals after migration, our data did not support the idea that welfare state arrangements played a more important role in their migration decisions compared to high-skilled individuals. In this sense our findings are in line with those of Ehata and Seeleib-Kaiser (2017), who found both high- and low-skilled EU migrants to have limited knowledge on the welfare system in the UK.

Although we balanced the number of men and women in the sample as well as over the different subgroups, no clear gender differences were observed regarding the link between formal welfare support and migration decisions. Welfare state arrangements that particularly affected mothers, such as maternity leave, prenatal care and child care, were for instance evaluated as important by fathers as well. However, men and women seemed to reflect differently on *informal* support provided by family in the origin and destination country; a dimension that deserves further consideration in future research.

Finally, our sample consisted of respondents from three different origin countries: Poland, Spain and the UK. Although the welfare systems in each of these countries differ substantially, the *way* in which they played a role in migration decisions seemed rather consistent over the three countries. That is, perceptions of the welfare system in the destination country were mainly shaped after migration, whereby arrangements in the Netherlands were compared to those experienced in the origin country. How the Dutch system was evaluated as such depended in part on the origin country of an individual. Nevertheless, whether and which welfare state arrangements were important to individuals seemed to vary more over the different life stages than between countries of origin.

To sum up, in our analyses we focused on the interaction of structure and agency over time, using the principles of timing, life-span development and time and place of the life course approach. Future research could further address how individuals' mobility decisions are shaped by preferences, personal ties and exchanges with other people in their social networks. The life course principles of agency and linked lives, which were left aside for the purpose of this study, appear useful tools for such analyses.

Migration decisions as embedded in the life course

In line with the proposed conceptual model (see Figure 2), our findings illustrate how the connection between a macro-level factor like the welfare system and intra-European migration decisions should be understood in a dynamic way. The principles of the life course approach provide useful tools to interpret, and in turn hypothesise on these dynamic connections. First, in line with the life-span development principle, from the interviews it becomes clear that intra-European migration decision-making is an ongoing process, which does not stop once a person has migrated. Furthermore, people's experiences with certain welfare state arrangements in either the origin or destination country largely determined their perceptions of the welfare system. Previous decisions to stay or to go, as well as one's broader experiences can therefore be expected to have an important influence on (subsequent) migration decisions. Second, because

welfare state arrangements in Europe are strongly tied to life course events, we found individuals' knowledge and perceptions of the welfare system, as well as its importance to them, to change over the life course. As intra-European migration decisions were mainly shaped by those factors relevant to individuals at the time of migration, the role of welfare state arrangements in migration decisions therefore varied between individuals migrating in different life stages. These findings fit the timing principle of the life course approach and can be applied more broadly to explain why macro-level conditions may have a different impact on individual migration decisions in different phases of life. Third, from the principle of time and place we understand how migration decisions should be located in the broader social context in which they are made. In our study, a distinction between the context as perceived by individuals *prior to* and *after* migration appeared crucial. Prior to migration, individuals in our sample typically had limited information on welfare state arrangements abroad, which does not support the idea of the welfare system attracting migrants. Rather, the welfare system influenced migration decisions through the way it was experienced in the country of residence, which could either be the origin country prior to migration or the destination country after. Our findings further highlighted that the macro-level circumstances an individual faces are different before and after migration, and that these changed circumstances will impact the way subsequent decisions to stay or to re-migrate are made. Thus, after migration the destination context can be perceived as a new potential origin context, and the factors stimulating the initial migration decision might be different from those encouraging further migration or settlement. The ongoing and dynamic nature of contemporary intra-European migration decisions – and the macro-level circumstances shaping them – should thus be better acknowledged, as is addressed in our conceptual model.

Discussion

Our study contributes to the literature in three important ways. First, using qualitative interview data, we were able to show how perceptions of the welfare system are shaped at the individual level and often after migration. Most previous studies on the link between welfare and migration evolved around the welfare magnet hypothesis, and used macro-level indicators like social expenditure in destination countries to explain migration flows (Giulietti and Wahba 2012). More recently, scholars have addressed the importance of de facto knowledge and experiences of EU migrants with the welfare system in the destination country (Dagilyte and Greenfields 2015; Ehata and Seeleib-Kaiser 2017), or transnational practices of migrants regarding care (e.g. Boccagni 2017). Adding to this body of literature, we found that EU migrants often had limited knowledge on welfare state arrangements in the destination country prior to migration, and that the role of welfare in origin countries should not be overlooked.

Second, our findings clearly illustrate the relevance of locating migration decisions in the individual's life course. Migration decisions were typically shaped by the factors most relevant to the individual at the time of migration, without looking too far into the future. Information on welfare state arrangements was mainly sought once the need for some sort of governmental support arose. Most respondents migrated when they were not reliant on welfare state arrangements (yet), and therefore did not really consider welfare in their migration decision (*timing*). From the interviews, it also became clear that

people's perceptions of welfare systems are largely shaped by their own experiences, or the experiences of people in their network (*life span development*). Related to this, individuals often had a limited image of the welfare system in the destination country prior to migration, which made it difficult to compare it to their status quo (*time and place*). At the same time, the interviews indicated three alternative ways in which the welfare system may influence migration decisions. First, prior to migration, welfare state arrangements in the origin country may shape or enable the move abroad by providing a (financial) safety net that protects against risks associated with migration. Second, after migration, general satisfaction with the way the government of a destination country organises its welfare system may increase individuals' intentions to stay. Third, welfare dependency can have a retaining effect when individuals are uncertain that they have the arrangements they need somewhere else, resulting in staying rather than moving. The latter may equally apply to those thus staying in the countries of origin, as to those who moved and for whom the country of destination became de facto the new country of origin.

Finally, our conceptual model that incorporates principles of the life course approach provides a valuable framework to explain the way in which structural factors can influence migration decisions in the contemporary European migration context. In his plea for a new understanding of European migration, King (2002) argued that a double embeddedness of migration should be recognised: at the macro scale, the study of migration must be embedded in the societies and social processes of both the places of origin and destination, and at the individual scale, migration must be embedded in a migrant's life course. Although international migration research increasingly seems to recognise such embeddedness of migration in time and space, so far the life course has not been integrated in conceptual models on international migration. This is unfortunate, as the impact of macro-level circumstances on individual migration decisions may vary over time, particularly for factors that are intrinsically connected to the life course. In the current study we therefore added a much needed dynamic element, surpassing critiques on the static nature of previous migration models and their understanding of migration as a singular event rather than a process (Carling and Collins 2018; De Haas 2010; King 2002; Van Hear, Bakewell, and Long 2018). Collins and Shubin (2015) have warned for a linear perception of time, which treats life stages as independent compartments which occur in a standard order. This could result in the presumption that individuals have complete agency over their migration decisions, and plan their migration trajectories to achieve strategic objectives. In line with their viewpoint, our findings illustrate that individuals do not view their mobility as fitting in specific timeframes of their lives with a specific purpose. Instead, migration decision-making appears an ongoing process which is shaped by past experiences, current circumstances and plans for the future.

Although our model builds on efforts that were made in the literature on residential mobility (see Coulter, Van Ham, and Findlay 2016), our study clearly shows that national borders still have relevant implications – even though they are less rigid for EU citizens moving within the EU. Individuals appeared to still have rather limited knowledge and perceptions of the destination country prior to their move, whereas with internal mobility such knowledge and perceptions can be expected to be much more complete. This is a crucial difference, particularly because individuals are likely confronted with much larger changes in contextual factors in the case of international migration (even within

Europe) as compared to internal mobility. International migration further complicates the gathering of information due to differences in language, customs and systems in general. These insights not only emphasise that a distinct model for international migration is still desirable; they also draw our attention to the importance of including migrants' (lack of) knowledge of macro-level circumstances in the receiving country when investigating the effect of these factors on international migration decisions.

Although we applied our conceptual model to intra-European migration decisions, the life course principles will contribute to the understanding of migration decisions in other international contexts. Furthermore, our dynamic model is not only useful to formulate hypotheses on the role of welfare systems in migration decisions, but also for other structural (macro-level) factors that impact and interact with individual lives over time. In any case, dynamically studying migration decision-making across the life course is much needed to understand what role migration plays in individual lives at different points in time. We thus encourage future research to apply our migration model to alternative sending and receiving contexts, and in relation to different factors. Only in this way we will be able to understand the dynamics of migration not just in Europe but also elsewhere.

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study were collected within the MobileWelfare project and are available on request from the MobileWelfare project leader (de Valk) and corresponding author (de Jong). The data are currently processed to be deposited at the Dutch data repository Dans.

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